

ENGLISH TRAVELLERS IN LATE
18TH CENTURY SPAIN:
EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS

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My work will be a brief comment on three English Voyagers to Spain in the late 18th Century encompassing the years 1760-88, the approximate time span of the reign of Charles III. The three travellers are Joseph Baretto, Joseph Townsend and William Beckford. Joseph Baretto in fact is not English.¹ He was born in Lombardy and was the son of a member of the Italian lesser nobility who was a successful architect in Turin. Baretto had lived in England for ten years before his 1760 voyage to Spain and was an intimate friend of Samuel Johnson and his literary circle of savants.

These three gentlemen were selected for two good reasons. One, travellers to Spain who wrote about the country in the late 18th century are few, and two, each man represents a different view of the kingdom's society and topography. Baretto spends only a month in Spain (1760) on a trip to Genoa, and focuses on the lower classes, the 'Goya' classes, and conditions of travel and life on the Spanish roads. Townsend's sojourn, almost two years in length, (1786-87), gives a much more involved view of Spain. Townsend, a former headmaster and Master of Arts, writes of agriculture, economics, manufactures, population, and is most inclusive. Townsend is literally a sourcebook of information on late 18th century Spain. William Beckford, the scion of a fabulously rich Jamaican sugar plantation family, young and brilliant, in 1786 is in disfavor with English society and has exiled himself from England to Iberia. Young, rich and handsome, Beckford easily captures and captivates first Lisbon's and then Madrid's high society. Beckford's Spain is upper class and compliments the Spains of Baretto and Townsend.

Joseph Baretto's first voyage to Spain occurs in the late fall and

early winter of 1760 at the onset of the reign of Charles III. Baretti is on his way to Genoa to see his family again after a 10 year absence from Italy. In his residence in London of over a decade, Baretti has made a name for himself in the city's literary circles. He is well known for his work in the Italian opera company and his Italian to English translations. His source of income is meager, while Townsend's is substantial and Beckford is one of the richest men in Western Europe. Baretti, first and foremost, is a critic. His intellectual honesty and critical harpoons against the major Italian writers of the 1740's, when he was the editor of an avante garde Italian literary journal, were the reasons for his leaving Italy in 1750.

Baretti relates his trip through Iberia by the literary device of a series of letters supposedly written while he is travelling to his family in Italy. From the beginning of the trip he clearly states that the *London Spectators* admonishes one to keep a daily journal and that he is writing these letters for future publication.² He knows his trip through Spain will be a quick one and he realizes that in such a short space of time he will not always meet interesting places or be part of arresting events. His letters explain these shortcomings more than once and he is apologetic of his daily fare to his readers of posadas, inns, innkeepers, travellers, friars, peasants and their customs, victuals and eating habits.³ A valuable record for the historian and social scientist but poor pickings for Baretti who wants to make the big splash before his reading public.

Leaving Falmouth Harbor on August 23, 1760, Baretti takes the King George Packet to Lisbon, arriving there on August 30th. Through Baretti's eyes we see the Lisbon of 1760, still devastated from the November 1766 earthquake, one of the world's worst quakes, and a devastation of which remind the present reader of 20th century Hiroshima. After several weeks in Portugal, and after many miserable *estallagems*, Baretti on the 22 September enters Spain through Badajoz. In Badajoz he encounters the Italian Jesuit Cardinal Acciaoli who has recently, with his entire entourage, been deported from Lisbon. A cardinal in provincial Badajoz is an event of some importance. The manner of the Cardinal's deportation from Portugal is a living historical event.⁴

Baretti will travel the main road from Badajoz through Talavera la Reyna (October 1st) to Madrid. Before coming to Madrid he will make a side trip to Toledo and Aranjuez where the Bourbon Kings are in residence. He will stay in Madrid for only a week, from 7-13. From Madrid he will make his way to Zaragossa and thence

to Barcelona, a one day stop over. Leaving Barcelona, he will go north to Gerona, Beziers, Nice, Monaco and finally to his destination, Genoa. The journal of the Journey supposedly is written in the inns at night before he retires. His notes of travel include the conditions of the *posadas* and the hospitality or lack of it by the *posadero(a)s*.⁵ Baretti had been promised by his guides that Spanish *posadas* are much cleaner and better than Portuguese *Estellagens*, a fact which he quickly verifies as being false.⁶ Baretti sees and even partakes in (at times) the rural peasants proclivity to dance the *fandango* from morning to sunset. All that is needed is a guitar, which everyone has, and castanets and the dance begins, Baretti remarks. He is enchanted with the dancing and compares the Spanish folk dancing with the French minuets which are very formal and inhibit spontaneity. (The 'true' Englishman, Joseph Townsend, who at forty-seven is very traditional and very English, and very formal, finds the dancing and the spontaneity disgusting).⁷ Baretti is also fascinated with the manner in which many of the Spaniards, literate and illiterate, are able to sing and versify as they go along, impromptu. He calls it a special talent of the Spanish race. Joseph Baretti's *Journey from London to Genoa* is truly a travel log of the Spanish road.

Both Baretti and Townsend are taken aback by the extreme wretchedness and non-productivity of the people and soil of *Estramadura*.⁸ Beckford, in his haste to reach Madrid, scarcely notices or pays attention to the landscape or the Spanish folk. Though Baretti is quick to compare customs and conditions in his travel with English and Italian counterparts, he is not quick to criticize his host country or the people. He adopts the tone of a man who has seen much and who understands much. He is a strong monarchist who sees in the elevation of Charles III an excellent opportunity for Spain to become strong again, economically and militarily, via decrees and new laws from Madrid. The enlightened and cultured man from Turin muses in one of his letters on the rise and decline of men and empires including Rome and warning England, proud mistress of seas (an England he truly loves and admires), of this constant thread of world history. In analyzing Spanish history, (though he has his doubts about the expulsion of the Moors), one of the country's major economic resources, he pokes fun at M. Voltaire who decried the expulsion as insanity, and supports monarchial and inquisitorial decrees deporting the Moors on the grounds that they constituted a perennial source of revolution in the midst of Spanish society.⁹ In weighing the effects of the importation of the large quantities of gold and silver from the Indies on the

people and nation of Spain, Baretti states that this 'easy wealth' has gone far to depopulate the less fertile areas of the Kingdom and has had a crippling effect on Spanish industry.¹⁰ For 1760, Baretti's assessment of the ills that beset the Spanish economy and the causes of these ills highlights an astute and critical mind. Not that his ideas on the Spanish decline were original as is seen here in the Venetian Ambassador Vendramin's comments in 1667.¹¹

... about this precious metal which comes to Spain from the Indies, the Spaniards say not without reason that it does on Spain as rain does upon a roof – it pours on her and it flows away.

But Baretti is primarily a thinking man who is aware of castles and women's smiles and many things.¹²

Commenting on the decline of Spain under her later Hapsburg monarchs, Baretti traces the religious and dynastic wars and policies of the earlier monarchs Charles V and Philip II, as major contributing causes of decline and at the same time empathizes with these policies given the temper of the earlier times and Spanish foreign policy.¹³

Baretti's letters also note the cultural and artistic levels of both Iberian monarchies. He has a much higher regard for Spanish cultural subsidization than Portuguese. But again he does forgive this lack of the Portuguese court by commenting that small nations such as Portugal are not to be criticized for their lower level of cultural attainment. He knows of Feijoo and his contributions to the Spanish enlightenment.¹⁴

Before his arrival in Madrid, Baretti makes a side trip to Toledo and devotes an entire letter to the great cathedral there and its mozarabic rite. He is impressed by this grand edifice and the income of the archbishop which he states is second only to the Holy Father in Rome. From Toledo he visits the royal palace and gardens at Aranjuez and is much taken with the beauty of the place. In reality, Aranjuez is his first glimpse of upper class Spanish architecture and art and he finds it on a level comparable to any advanced nation in Europe. He admonishes Mr. Clarke, an English traveller to Spain the year before, for Clarke's statement that 'the palace of Aranjuez is a tolerable edifice and the garden a dead flat'. 'There are some people', chides Baretti, referring to Clarke, 'in this world whom (sic) nothing can please out of their own country'.¹⁵ This comment on Clarke is one of the keys to Baretti's success as a traveller 'out of his own country'. Though we know from Ian Robertson's introduction of Baretti's volatile nature and

quick temper, on the road, he is accomodating comprising and versatile. In his own words, 'for the successful traveller a sense of humor is most important'.¹⁶

Baretti's entrance into the Madrid of 1760 is a disaster. Art and culture notwithstanding, the open sewers of the Spanish capital and the noxious odours emanating from them makes it impossible for him to remain long in Madrid. He refers to the city as the 'great cloaca'.¹⁷ In 1765, on a return visit, he will find Madrid healthful and beautiful, accomplishments due to the hygenic program by Charles III to clean up the city. But in 1760 he will only be a week in Madrid. His eyewitness views of the city makes for a solid historical vista of the late 18th century Spanish capital.

Valencia and the huerta of Valencia captivates Baretti. He is particularly impressed with the developing high standards of the medical school and training hospital under the new plan of Charles' ministers. Barcelona, where he spends only one day, is a city of bustling economic activity and commercial expansion. He comments on the clothing establishments, weapons manufacture, the arsenal and foundry for the casting of the big cannon destined for the wars of the Bourbon monarchy, blanket production, etc. Townsend in 1787 is similarly impressed.¹⁸ Baretti notes that the Catalonians are very favorable to Charles III because he, on assuming the throne, cancelled the debt imposed on them for taking the losing side in the War of the Spanish Succession.

As for Spanish banditry and highway robbery, Baretti makes light of it. The roads may be the worst in western Europe but for this English traveller they are safe if one does not travel alone and keeps his weapons in view for the eyes of strangers. Townsend is very conscious of the stories of highway banditry and is not so matter of fact on this hazard to the traveller.¹⁹

The journal describes at length the history (if Baretti knows it) of the cities Baretti travels through. I believe these insights must have been added later when he edited his notes. The 1760 voyager is enchanted by the 'Moorish castles' which he sees everywhere built on their high mountain summits. He also catalogs the conditions of the *posadas* where he spends the nights, and the fact that the traveller must bring his own food with him to the inn though he has use of the fire for cooking purposes. The variety and types of food available on the Spanish roads and the hospitality and openness of the Spanish country people provide insights for the letters. Particularly vexing to Baretti, Townsend and the American minister John Adams, in that gentlemen's brief trip through Asturias in 1780, were the fleas and other house vermin. The fleas make

sleeping in the backcountry Spanish provinces a very difficult thing to come by.²⁰

Both Baretti and Townsend remark on the curious custom of Spanish officials meeting their callers or guests in sleeping cap and nightgown. For Baretti it is a village corregedor in Estramadura, in soiled nightgown and cap, and for Townsend it is the powerful minister of state Compomanes who greets him so attired in his bedroom. 'This is the custom of the country' a Swiss woman traveller married to a Spaniard tells Baretti when he related this 'shocking' scene to her. 'The Spanish think nothing of greeting one in their nightclothes, especially older men practice this custom, and you (Baretti) should not see this as a sign of disrespect'.²¹

The journal's comments on Charles III, fortunately, Baretti does see him on this trip, is a 'must' for the 18th century Spanish historian.²² That Baretti's journal has only lately been re-published can be seen in its absence from the footnotes of recent books on Spain in the late 18th century. Its 'Goyaesque' word pictures provide valuable insights of rural Iberia in 1760.

Joseph Townsend's three volume *Journey Through Spain, 1786-87*, a trip made when Townsend was forty-seven years of age, is a veritable storehouse of factual information on the Spain of those years. Townsend, a former English headmaster and holder of a Master of Arts Degree, was an ardent amateur naturalist and scientist, avocations which were very fashionable in Europe and in America among the literate upper and bourgeois literate classes. As a learned man with an academic reputation, Townsend has easy access to men of learning and politics, wherever he goes in Spain.

Townsend enters Spain through Barcelona. He will spend many months in the kingdom and visit most of the major cities and provinces. He is particularly interested in all phases of the new science, and meticulously notes the flora, fauna and geological formations that he encounters on his travels. He likes to jot these finds down in their Latin names when he can. With Townsend, a much quoted set of volumes, in later histories of the period, facts and figures are the mainstays of the trip. He is writing for an English speaking audience interested in manufacturing, population, economic indecies, botanical and other natural history phenomena, agriculture, etc. Townsend's book accents the fact that by 1786, the 'new European' is an intellectual with a questing mind (and an open mind) who expects to find similar men in other societies with like interests.

Be it Barcelona, Valencia or Madrid, Townsend puts down all of interest to him in his journal. Barcelona, commercial, industrial

and economically thriving, is a city very much like that of the cities of his mothercountry. Though he is impressed with the vigor and expansion of the city and its world wide trade, he singles out the Royal Academy of Arts, which he visits, and the municipal hospital for particular praise. He will visit the museums, private and public scientific and natural history collections, hospitals, schools, manufacturing establishments, everything of interest in the new Spain of the enlightenment. He is an Adam Smithian in economics and commends Charles III and his ministers for their farsighted economic policies which incorporate the Adam Smith philosophy. Medicine and its advancement is also high on the list of his observing priorities. The Barcelona municipal hospital is a wonder to him. 'No hospital that I have yet seen on the Continent is so well administered as this general hospital of this city', he writes.²³ The progressive convalescent ward is separated from the sick wards at the hospital and is an innovation which Townsend finds very intelligent. The Townsend trip, made at the close of Charles III's reign, provides an important eyewitness picture of Spain before the French Revolution and Napoleonic debacles. Townsend's visits with Campomanes, a man he very much admires and whose program for Spain he supports fully, Floridablanca, Penalba, Aranda, and other noteworthy figures in the ecclesiastical and scientific Hispanic worlds as well as the political one, are important first hand glimpses of these men of power and politics.²⁴ Townsend is also invited to the Madrid parties, salons and tertulias and will meet the capital's high society. The younger William Beckford will also be invited to many of these affairs. Townsend is to be found in the cell of Feijoo in Oviedo, the medical school in Valencia, the theater in Madrid, the college campus of Valladolid and Salamanca, visiting in Cadiz with the old and bent Antonio de Ulloa and every place which he feels represents the Spain in 1786. His volumes are invaluable sources of information of the epoch. In one of his musings, when examining a fossil in amber, he remarks cryptically, 'we see it (the fossil) likewise as one link in a vast chain, the origin of which all philosophers are laboring to discover.'²⁵

The William Beckford journal, recently edited and re-discovered is a tour into the play of Madrid's 'high society'. Beckford, rich in line for a title, loses his bid because of rumors and scandal about his deviant sexual practices. He appears to be bi-sexual. The unfortunate death of his young wife in Switzerland complicated Beckford's life further and the family decides to ship him off to the Jamaica estates. However, Beckford becomes seasick and land-

ing in Lisbon decides to remain there. Lisbon society is enraptured with the young handsome and intelligent Englishman. Feted by all, he is the English crown prince of the Lisbon inner circle.²⁶ His previous reputation and his enemies in England make it impossible for Beckford to be presented to the Portuguese queen and he is forced to leave Lisbon for reasons of state. In Madrid he is again lionized by the dukes, marquis and duchesses and is invited to all the important parties. His journal is intensely personal and episodic. He seduces many hearts both male and female. Beckford is particularly drawn to the exotic and occult and is a great favorite of the ambassador of the Ottoman Empire. The journal highlights the variety of life and its intensity among the nobility and bureaucracy of the capital. Beckford's friends and confidants are nobles, high officials, ambassadors and women of the upper class. He has known several of the women in other capitals of Europe. Through the few pages of the journal the historian can discover a valuable picture of the mores and amusements of Madrid's society.²⁷ Beckford has no interest in the peasantry or the *Nueva Planta* of Charles III's ministers. The journal highlights the similarity of interests and diversions of upper class Europe, a Europe which Beckford, by birth, education and manners blends easily into.

NOTES:

¹ Joseph Baretti, *Journey from London to Genoa*, 2 vols. (New York, 1970); Joseph Townsend, *A Journey through Spain, 1786-87*, 3 vols. (London, 1791); Boyd Alexander, ed., *The Journal of William Beckford in Portugal and Spain, 1787-88* (London, 1954).

² J. Baretti, I, p. 269.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

⁴ J. Baretti I, pp. 254-259; Richard Herr, *The Eighteenth Century Revolution in Spain* (Princeton, 1958), p. 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

⁶ J. Townsend, I, p. 332; J. Baretti I, p. 249; Beckford, during the evening of his first night in Spain is treated to the *Fandango*, danced by the lady of the house and her two handmaidens, accompanied by guitars. Alexander, *Beckford*, p. 286.

⁷ J. Baretti, I, p. 292.

⁸ J. Baretti, I, p. 361.

⁹ Carlo M. Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution* (New York, 1976) p. 235.

¹⁰ J. Baretto, II, p. 156.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 361-64.

¹² J. Baretto has seen 8 volumes of Feijoo's works and comments that the Benedictine monk is not venerated on the other side of the Pyrenees as he is in Spain. J. Baretto, II, p. 33.

¹³ J. Baretto, I, p. 377.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 375-76.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

¹⁶ J. Baretto, II, pp. 268-69; J. Townsend, I, p. 134; Herr, *Eighteenth Century*, pp. 141-45.

¹⁷ J. Baretto, II pp. 388-89; J. Townsend, II, p. 72. Townsend comments that a guide should go through the forest before the party so as not to be robbed like the other groups.

¹⁸ J. Baretto, II, p. 242; The American minister John Adams, on his way to France during the American Revolution, tarried in Spain for awhile. Adams was aghast with the vermin he found in every bed in backcountry Asturias and stated that sleep was impossible while travelling in the country. Frank MacShane, *The American in Europe* (New York, 1965), p. 53.

¹⁹ J. Baretto, I, p. 325; The great minister of Charles III, Campomanes greets Townsend in his bedroom in cap and gown. J. Townsend, I, p. 282.

²⁰ J. Baretto, II, pp. 81-87.

²¹ J. Townsend, I, p. 132.

²² J. Townsend, I, pp. 243-44; II, p. 23; See E. Allison Peers, *Spain, A Companion to Spanish Studies*, 5th ed. (London, 1956), p. 74 for the role of Charles III's ministers in the Spanish state; See also, W.N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley, *Spain Under the Bourbons, 1700-1833* (Columbia, South Carolina, 1973) for the more important documents of the Bourbon monarchs of Spain.

²³ J. Townsend, II, p. 57.

²⁴ J. Alexander, *Beckford*, pp. 14-18.

²⁵ J. Alexander, *Beckford*, pp. 300-319.